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John Francis Rague : Architect

It was John F. Rague, the architect, who brought sense and proportion and art into the plans of the Capitol that was erected on Capitol Square. To him alone belongs the credit for whatever merit there is in the architectural design of the Territorial Capitol of Iowa. Who was this man Rague whose name is thus immortalized in the history of Iowa City? The question has been asked a thousand times.

The birth record in the family Bible that belonged to his mother reads: "John Francis Rague, born at Scotch Plains, N. J., March 24, 1799." His father, who had served as surgeon in the French army, came to America with General Lafayette to take part in the War for Independence. Later he died from a wound which he had received in that war.

It was in the city of New York that John Francis Rague received an elementary education. As he grew to manhood he became enamored of the art that finds expression in architecture. Trained by the distinguished architect, Milard Le Fevre, he busied himself with architectural work in New York City for some years before coming

to Illinois in 1831. He located in the town of Springfield. There he pursued his chosen profession; sang in the choir of the Presbyterian Church; met Stephen A. Douglas; formed the acquaintance of Mary Todd; and groomed Abraham Lincoln for a dance.

Rague's interest in civic affairs is evidenced by his election in 1836 to the board of trustees of the town of Springfield. His devotion to education led him into the presidency of the Mechanics Institute. He was a liberal in both politics and religion.

It was the proposed removal of the State capital of Illinois from Vandalia to Springfield that brought to architect Rague a major opportunity in his professional career. No sooner had the State legislature selected Springfield as the new capital than the *Sangamo Journal* advertised for plans for a capitol building. When the plans that came in were examined, John F. Rague was awarded the first prize of two hundred dollars. The capital commissioners promptly adopted his design and employed him to supervise the erection of the building on the modest salary of \$1000 a year.

The building of the State House at Springfield (a specimen of Grecian architecture declared by its admirers to be the finest public building west of the Alleghanies) greatly enhanced the profes-

sional reputation of John F. Rague. Many people wondered how so small a town could produce so competent an architect. But they soon forgot him; and succeeding generations remembered the building, not as the vision of a distinguished architect, but as the place where Abraham Lincoln delivered the "Divided House Speech" and debated the political issues of the day with Stephen A. Douglas.

The striking resemblance of the Old Stone Capitol at Iowa City to the Old State House at Springfield are interesting and significant in view of the fact that John F. Rague was supervising the erection of the Illinois Capitol when called upon to plan the capitol building for the Territory of Iowa. On the Fourth of July, 1839, the name of Architect John F. Rague was placed in the cornerstone of the Illinois State House, just as on the Fourth of July, 1840, it was inscribed on a scroll that was deposited in the cornerstone of the Capitol at Iowa City.

While the completion of the State House at Springfield dragged wearily through the years, John F. Rague moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1844. During his ten years of residence in that State he designed the notable Phoenix Building at Milwaukee and three buildings for the State University at Madison. Interested in music, he

served as treasurer of a Beethoven Society. His candidacy for justice of the peace in 1846 and for alderman in 1849 met with defeat.

It was soon after his second marriage that John F. Rague moved to Dubuque in 1854. There he designed and supervised the building of the county jail, the city hall, the Langworthy octagonal house, the Bissell residence, and several ward school buildings. For a while he served on the city school board. He was an intimate friend of Stephen Hempstead, erstwhile Governor of Iowa.

Tragedy presaged the end. During the eighteen sixties the eyes that had seen so much that was beautiful lost the power of sight. The architect of the Old Stone Capitol became totally blind. On September 24, 1877, he died; was buried in Linwood Cemetery; and then forgotten. History has not been kind to John Francis Rague.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH